

The USAMAA-E's mortuary is the "funeral home" for U.S. military personnel, family members, Defense Department civilians and other Americans assigned to or deployed within the U.S. European and Central commands.

SOLDIERS assigned to the 21st Theater Support Command's U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Activity, Europe, in Landstuhl, Germany, don't have an option when it comes to thinking about death. In early March, as war between the United States and Iraq appeared imminent, they thought about it more than usual.

In the "uniform room" of USAMAA-E's mortuary, one soldier checked a rack of joint-services uniforms to determine the number and sizes available. Various types of head gear sat in formation on the top shelf of the closet, and assorted spit-shined shoes lined the floorboard.

The soldier sorted through drawers that contained underwear, ties, socks, brass and unit and rank insignia, making a note to order more of several combat-arms units' patches.

USAMAA-E's mortuary — the sole "funeral home" for U.S. military

personnel, family members, Defense Department civilians and other Americans assigned to or deployed within U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command — was preparing, too, for the possibility of war with Iraq and the resulting potential casualties.

Family members will depend on the mortuary-affairs specialists at the Landstuhl facility to professionally handle the remains of loved ones who are killed in that combat, said David Roath, USAMAA-E director.

In recent years, the mortuary has received the remains of 12 Americans killed in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Kenya, sailors who died in 2000 in the terrorist attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen, victims of the March 2001 RC-12 plane crash in Giebelstadt, Germany, and some of the 155 victims of the November 2001 avalanche in Kaprun, Austria, Roath said.

The latter "was one of the most difficult cases for me," said SSG

Konrad Murak, mortuary casualty NCO, "because one whole family from Landstuhl's neighboring community, Ramstein, was killed in the accident, and they had two boys close to my sons' ages."

The USAMAA-E mortuary operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. "That's because Europe's military mortuary plays such a significant role overseas," Roath said.

Remains bound for the United States must come to the Landstuhl facility to be processed. It's also where the necessary American death certificate is issued, said armed forces regional medical examiner Dr. (LTC) Kathleen Ingwersen.

In 2002, the mortuary received 255 sets of remains, Ingwersen added, among them an Afghan freedom fighter who had to be returned to Afghanistan to be buried, in keeping with Muslim tradition, within 24 hours of death.

Care and Respect

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

A 1996 policy change allowing USAMAA-E to ship remains directly to next of kin has dramatically reduced the amount of time families must wait to conduct services and plan burials, Roath said.

Among the services the mortuary provides is a viewing area for family members and friends. Additionally, mortuary-affairs specialists can furnish information about paperwork requirements involving a death overseas and guidance on burial and cremation, how to conduct a memorial service, even what types of caskets are available.

The latter, ranging in cost from about \$2,500 to \$3,000, are available at the mortuary free of charge for active-duty personnel, Roath said. Active-duty personnel may purchase caskets for family members at government cost.

When suicide or foul play may be a factor in a death, USAMAA-E enlists Ingwersen's expertise to determine what actually happened.

When the cause of death is questionable, an autopsy must first be performed. "We gather forensic evidence whenever someone dies

after being hospitalized for less than 24 hours, or when there's no known natural cause — when death is sudden, suspicious, unexplained, or 'accidental,'" Ingwersen said.

Her area of responsibility covers 121 countries, she added. It's a daunting task, but one made a bit easier with help from board-certified pathologists in-theater who are qualified to perform autopsies under her supervision.

When there are six or more sets of remains to be examined for medical or legal reasons at any one time, and Ingwersen can't perform all of the procedures herself, the remains are sent to the Defense Department's mortuary in Dover, Del.

Ingwersen travels to other countries, too, to perform forensic tests when the remains cannot be sent to

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Mortuary-affairs specialists move the casket into the USAMAA-E facility, where the body will be prepared for shipment home.

Landstuhl, she said. That's typically the case when someone dies in a country that doesn't allow the removal of remains that have not been embalmed, such as Italy and Spain.

Annually, some 100 deaths within the two commands require investigation, Ingwersen said. About 50 percent of those turn out to be the result of accidents, and five to 10 percent are hospital-related deaths that require a medical examiner's autopsy to verify hospital findings.

Many of the natural deaths that occur are those of older retirees who die at their homes, Ingwersen said. And, within the theater of responsibility, Europe's mortuary received 43 combat casualties in 2002 relating to Operation Enduring Freedom. Those included victims of explosive-ordnance disposal accidents, Ingwersen said.

Death Investigations

On a recent day, the body of a 19-year-old active-duty soldier who died from a gunshot wound in Afghanistan arrived by hearse. And the body of an infant girl lay inside one of two examination rooms.

Because there were no witnesses to either of the deaths, Ingwersen was called in to perform autopsies.

Under the glow of ultraviolet lights, she searched the young soldier's body, first for any fibers. She then collected specimens from under his fingernails and swabbed other areas of the body for DNA samples.

Outside the heavy doors, soldiers adjusted a photo enlarger as they zoomed in on dog tags, keys and currency the soldier had in his pocket at the time he died. Then they photographed the blood-soaked uniform bearing the soldier's unit patch and insignia.

The scenes, while indisputably grim, are reminders of the fragility of



A USAMAA-E staffer photographs the personal effects of a young service member who committed suicide.

life and the pain of loss, Ingwersen said. "It doesn't matter how many times I do this; it affects me."

The only satisfaction she gets from any of these criminal-medical exams is in determining the actual cause of death and providing to the families facts about what happened, she said.

"The most important thing we can give families who suffer the death of a loved one is facts, offering them some closure.

"A few years ago we got a case that everyone said was a suicide. It didn't look like a suicide to me. Soon after, we got a confession of an execution-

With Care and Respect



Closets of uniforms, shoes, flags and other items are kept stocked in anticipation of casualties stemming from action in USAMAA-E's area of responsibility.

type murder,” said Ingwersen, who has on numerous occasions testified in court on a victim’s behalf.

Among the many services USAMAA-E provides is positive identification and full photographic documentation of remains, personal effects and clothing removed from the body before an autopsy, as well as photographs of the autopsy itself for investigative purposes.

“The criminal-medical investiga-

tion is a team effort,” she said.

Specimens go to a criminal investigation laboratory in Georgia and to the Armed Forces Toxicology Laboratory at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in the United States. Landstuhl Regional Medical Center’s laboratories also aid in the investigative process.

“The Sherlock Holmes-type work is intellectually stimulating,” said Ingwersen. “Knowing we’re providing answers for families is tremendously fulfilling.”

Disaster Mortuary Affairs Recovery Team

Some two dozen soldiers from the USAMAA-E are also part of the Disaster Mortuary Affairs Recovery Team, or DMART, the only team within the Defense Department that includes mortuary and forensic specialists, said Roath. They augment researchers from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory – Hawaii, to recover remains in the European Theater.

But unlike CILHI researchers, who chiefly search for the remains of service members killed or missing in action in past wars, the DMART deals with current deaths and bodies, more than remains, Roath said.

“Search and recovery is one of our primary missions,” Ingwersen said. “As the initial responders to accidents

within our jurisdiction, we can protect the integrity of the scene.”

“We go to where the fight is, where the special forces are operating,” said Roath. “And not once has one of our soldiers said, ‘No. I’m not going there.’”

DMART members were in Afghanistan following the Tarnak Farm bombing accident, in which a “friendly” bomb fell on Canadian forces, and in Shamshi, Pakistan, following the January 2002 crash of a Marine Corps KC-130 cargo plane, Roath said.

“We had to ‘grid’ down a 1,100-foot mountain, documenting the number of weapons aboard the aircraft and having them checked out, to eliminate the possibility that someone may have gone crazy aboard the plane and started shooting everyone,” Roath said.

Soldiers of the team also compose the “Fallen Service-Member Detail” — established after U.S. involvement in Bosnia — to pay tribute to forward-deployed soldiers who are killed, and provide training to temporarily assigned mortuary-affairs soldiers, Roath said.

Whether the job is search and recovery, criminal investigation or providing the final services to members of the military who gave their lives for their country, USAMAA-E’s mortuary affairs specialists stand ready to do their jobs with professionalism and compassion, Roath said. □

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The flag-draped casket of a soldier who died in Afghanistan arrives at the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Activity-Europe mortuary in Landstuhl, Germany.

With



USAMAA-E soldiers prepare to load a casket aboard the hearse that will carry it to Rhein-Main Air Base, where it will be loaded aboard an aircraft bound for the United States.